

Opportunity awaits in upcoming session

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In the upcoming session, the members of the Alabama Legislature have an exciting opportunity to showcase their leadership and statesmanlike discretion.

While much has been discussed about the financial challenges we face this year, it should be seen as an opportunity to thoroughly examine our options on each issue, meticulously evaluate available resources, and to act wisely in endorsing legislation and passing the state's budgets.

The current state of affairs in America and in Alabama demands we act in a manner that guards and protects the trust placed in us by the people of this state.

We are all aware that projected state revenues will not be what we once anticipated. Though the state's economy is still vibrant and our government is financially sound, limited resources have moved us toward a serious debate regarding funding priorities.

Our budget issues will require us to explore all available revenue sources without raising taxes on Alabama's working families. This may include righting what many perceive to be a wrong regarding ExxonMobil's financial relationship and responsibility to the state.

The Supreme Court overturned a jury verdict against Exxon and cost Alabama more than \$3 billion in expected revenue. This money would have had an immediate and lasting effect on desperate needs within our schools and nursing homes.

There are many notable projects that will be submitted for funding this year. The probing question that will plague the Legislature is not the worthiness of the initiatives, but rather the availability of resources to address them.

For example, a proposed increase in funding for Alabama's pre-K program will be brought to the table. There is no question pre-K is one of the wisest investments the state has ever made. The challenge we face is how best to allocate funds to expand pre-K so all of Alabama's preschool children have equal access to it.

Additionally, it is equally important that any expansion of the program allows for an increased number of qualified pre-K teachers. Expanding access to the program without increasing the number of properly trained teachers does not help the children of this state. Fully funding the pre-K program has the potential to impose genuine, lasting change on education in Alabama.

The people of this state have also been clear that they want ethics legislation passed. While a ban on transfers between political action committees garners the most headlines in the state's papers, we can't pick and choose what constitutes ethics reform according to what is politically expedient.

As part of any true ethics reform package, both houses must again pass the bill that requires registration and disclosure by those who lobby the executive branch of state government.

Alabama's economy remains prosperous because of the vast strides we have made in attracting world-class industry and innovative businesses to the state. The economic impact of the automotive industry has been well-documented. Most recently, ThyssenKrupp chose to build its North American facility in Washington County. Our willingness to offer expansive incentives has made Alabama a serious player on the world economic development stage.

What we must now do is focus our efforts on serving the needs of our existing industry as well as the new companies that have chosen to make Alabama their home. We cannot expect to continue our economic

progress without providing the necessary resources to maintain and expand our state transportation infrastructure, which remains the lifeblood of all economic development.

A prime example of why this sort of development is vital to our future growth is in the Huntsville area. This is the 50th anniversary of America's space program. Beginning in 1958, the space race transformed Huntsville into an international technological center.

As we celebrate this great milestone, our country's efforts to explore space are once again focusing on the Huntsville area and Alabama to lead the way. With major components of the new ARES crew launch vehicle being developed and designed in Huntsville, that community is seeing a surge in industrial providers and suppliers. In addition, the military realignment through the Base Realignment and Closure Commission will bring a multitude of new residents to the Tennessee Valley. It is absolutely imperative that the transportation infrastructure around the Huntsville area be in optimal condition for another historic period of growth.

It certainly goes without further explanation that a variety of new and innovative initiatives will emerge during the upcoming legislative session.

With new ideas come periods of great deliberation and competition for funding. I remain optimistic that legislative action will be conducted in the best interest of the people of Alabama and not by personal or partisan objectives. Jim Folsom Jr. is a former governor and the current lieutenant governor of Alabama. E-mail: info@ltgov.alabama.gov.